# The Role of Trust in Social Media Platforms in Shaping Political Effects of Dissident Information Flows: A Case of Facebook in Kazakhstan

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Drawing on survey data from Kazakhstan—a Central Asian country of significant geopolitical importance yet often underrepresented in academic discourse—this study examines the influence of social media on political attitudes and engagement within restrictive

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Date submitted: 2024-01-18

information environments. Kazakhstan's high Internet penetration and extensive social media user base provide a unique backdrop for analyzing how digital communication shapes political outcomes in an authoritarian context. Our findings reveal that exposure to dissident information on social media is negatively associated with general trust in government and positively associated with protest intent. Furthermore, these relationships are moderated by citizens' trust in Facebook, the platform reporting the highest frequency of government-critical news in the country. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on digital media effects in authoritarian regimes, highlighting the interplay between digital media consumption, platform trust, and political effects.

*Keywords: social media, trust, dissident information flows, protest, Kazakhstan*

The Arab Spring uprisings catalyzed extensive research on the influence of social media in authoritarian contexts. Scholars have argued that in regimes where traditional media is tightly controlled, the Internet and social media become potent channels for citizens to access and disseminate regime-critical information (Faris, 2013; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Khamis & Vaughn, 2012). These platforms not only facilitate political dissent but also have the potential to mobilize unconventional political actions, such as protests (Fergusson & Molina, 2019). Evidence also suggests that extensive social media use might instill antiregime sentiments (Bekmagambetov et al., 2018). Recognizing this digital challenge, authoritarian governments have employed strategies ranging from overt network shutdowns to subtle measures like traffic-filtering tools and deploying proregime commentators (Gunitsky, 2015; Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Despite the growing body of research on technology and politics in closed states, notable gaps remain. Much of the existing literature focuses on extremes: countries like Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring, where new media catalyzed political upheavals, and China, which has fortified its regime using digital tools (Han, 2018; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Lorentzen, 2014; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). This emphasis often overlooks the unique dynamics in lower-capacity regimes that sit in the middle of the resilience spectrum. Current studies, especially those using public opinion surveys, tend to generalize the political effects of social media use, exploring how general usage influences metrics like regime approval, political trust, and political awareness (Qin, Strömberg, & Wu, 2017; Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). Although new media is often seen as a "liberation technology" with broad implications (Diamond, 2010), it is crucial to understand the effects of exposure to dissident narratives on social platforms in closed regimes with state-controlled media and Internet censorship.

This research focuses on Kazakhstan, a geopolitically significant yet under-researched Central Asian state, aiming to bridge these gaps. With high Internet penetration and a substantial social media user base, Kazakhstan offers a unique lens through which to understand the political effects of information communication technologies in authoritarian settings (Bekmagambetov, 2024). Our study, supported by an extensive and comprehensive survey, provides a representative snapshot of the Kazakhstani population's digital media consumption and its political implications.

Our results indicate that exposure to dissident information on social media is significantly related to general trust in the government and the expression of protest intent. These relationships are further nuanced by individuals' levels of trust in social media platforms such as Facebook.

Our research makes several important contributions to the existing literature. First, by focusing on Kazakhstan—a nation often overlooked in political communication studies (Bekmagambetov et al., 2023)—we illuminate the dynamics within low-capacity regimes that exhibit slow transitional tendencies, thereby enriching the discourse around authoritarian resilience. Our work extends the boundaries of political communication research into Central Asia, a region of significant geopolitical importance yet frequently sidelined in academic discussions (Dall' Agnola & Wood, 2022), emphasizing the intricate role digital media plays in shaping political landscapes in such regimes.

Second, we refine the broader understanding of the political effects of social media in authoritarian contexts by underscoring the paramount importance of exposure to dissident information, as opposed to mere platform usage, and by highlighting the effect of trust in social media platforms. This nuanced approach offers a more granular perspective on how citizens in closed regimes interact with and are influenced by digital political content (Han, 2018).

Lastly, from an empirical standpoint, our study stands out by leveraging a robust, representative sample of the Kazakhstani population ($N$ = 6,800), gathered through a comprehensive face-to-face survey. This methodological choice ensures an unbiased view of media consumption patterns and their political ramifications, setting our research apart from many contemporary studies that rely on potentially biased cellphone-based surveys.

### Political Effects of Social Media in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has been a regional leader in Internet access, beginning with an approximate penetration rate of 8.5% in 2007 (Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, & Zittrain, 2010). This rate increased sharply to 34% in 2010, climbed to 71% in 2015, and reached 91% in 2021. As of early 2024, Internet penetration stands at 92.3% (Kemp, 2024; Tengrinews.kz, 2012). The Kazakh government has been developing information community technology (ICT) infrastructure mostly for economic purposes (Nurmakov, 2017). Notably, Kazakhstan has led the way in Central Asia by implementing e-government initiatives that have streamlined bureaucratic and public service procedures (Ponczek, 2022). Building on this progress, the country announced that nearly all public and semipublic agencies would adopt the open data concept, focusing on enhancing transparency, collaboration, and citizen participation within the e-government framework (Kassen, 2019a). Today, citizens can submit complaints, feedback, or suggestions to government agencies and officials through the e-Otinish system and the e-government portal (Paperlab.kz, 2022). All this has offered the population a sense of development and transparency (Kassen, 2019b).

At the same time, the regime has not demonstrated its readiness to democratize. After the post-Perestroika brief press pluralism, there was a gradual crackdown on independent media, amassing all media control in the hands of the government. The Internet has become the only place for disseminating dissident information, though initially, only a minority had access to it (Human Rights Watch, 1999). With the full-

scale arrival of the Internet, the regime followed the same playbook that had been used for traditional media. The government blocked websites and sanctioned bloggers. However, the emergence and growing popularity of social networking sites have made those old methods of control much less effective.

Social media platform popularity among Kazakhstani users varied over time. Although initially, Russian social media, such as Moy Mir, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte, were the most popular (Anceschi, 2015), currently, Kazakhstanis prefer Western platforms and apps. This drastic shift in preference might be explained by a dislike for the Russian language focus and feature inferiority of Russian social media. Alternatively, Kazakhstanis and other Central Asians might have developed security and censorship concerns about Russian platforms when these applications began requiring authentic cell phone numbers for registration, whereas Western apps allow alternatives like e-mail addresses (Agnola, 2022). Currently, in the region, users in Kazakhstan mostly use Western social media, unlike the majority of users in other Central Asian states (Dall' Agnola & Wood, 2022). Most recent statistics suggest that almost 72% of Kazakhstan's population have registered Facebook accounts (NapoleonCat, 2022). Similarly, as of this writing, another Western social media platform, Instagram, has 82.7% of Kazakhstanis aged 13 and above among its registered users (Dall' Agnola & Wood, 2022).

Among the two most popular Western social media platforms, Facebook, by far, is more political. Not only does it have many social activists, political dissidents, and critical voices, it has also played an important role in coordinating a number of protests and demonstrations in the country (Nurmakov, 2017). Some of the prominent critical voices that regularly post on Facebook and have massive audiences include journalists, political activists, and political analysts. For these reasons, Facebook is known for its regime-critical political content. The fact that the network's popularity has recently grown, surpassing 70% of the total population, suggests that Facebook and other similar online platforms may be poised to influence future political outcomes.

Indeed, during and after 2015, when Internet penetration substantially increased, social media played a significant role in organizing and coordinating protests in Kazakhstan (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022; Nurmakov, 2017). For example, starting in 2013, women repeatedly used social media to organize protests demanding maternity benefits and subsidized housing. In 2016, social media helped mobilize large numbers of protesters across the country against land and pension reforms. Exiled opposition forces, such as the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, also used social media to disseminate critical information and organize political action, attracting the disproportionate attention of citizens because of the regime's ineffective censorship campaign.

The January 2022 protests over a gas price hike, which led to the declaration of a nationwide state of emergency and numerous casualties, also had a significant social media component (Kudaibergen, 2024). More specifically, during the January 2022 protests, social media was particularly instrumental in the early stages before state authorities began disrupting Internet access later on January 4. Even after the government imposed an Internet blackout, protesters managed to bypass the restrictions by using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to share information and coordinate demonstrations. According to witness accounts documented by the Center for Social and Political Studies "Strategiia" (Ileuova, 2024), VPNs allowed people to report on gatherings at the Almaty Arena, which was a key focal point of the January 4 protest in the

southern capital, Almaty. Facebook, in particular, played a pivotal role in spreading news about these gatherings. Opposition activist Zhanbolat Mamai actively used the platform to mobilize people until his arrest later that evening, and many participants reported learning about the protests through his posts on Facebook. In addition to these individual efforts, organized movements like the youth group "Oyan, Kazakhstan!" via Telegram distributed instructions on how to organize and behave in the lead-up to the protests on January 4.

Despite arguments that the Nazarbayev regime successfully depoliticized the Internet space (Anceschi, 2015) and rendered the younger generation apolitical (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2020; Laruelle, 2019), recent evidence suggests that Kazakhstanis are becoming increasingly politically engaged in the era of social media (Kudaibergenova, 2019). Although only a minority of activists openly challenge and criticize the government, a much larger population of Internet users learn about political issues, draw awareness to them, and help coordinate across Kazakhstan's lightly populated and widespread land area (Sairambay, 2022). Certain civic groups that actively use social media manage to get attention and responses from the government by using the "atomized collective action" strategy, which allows them to fly under the radar of authoritarian repression (Wood, 2022, p. 94). In fact, Nikolayenko (2015) suggests that Kazakhstan's government censorship and information control measures make ICT's political effects more pronounced.

Digital media's influence on citizens' opinions and actions may be shaped by living in an authoritarian environment with limited access to information, where exposure to critical content on social media affects their trust in the government (Bekmagambetov et al., 2018). The last decade has seen an increase in nontraditional forms of political participation on a small and large scale that originated on or were facilitated by social media (Nurmakov, 2017). Although the protests that erupted in the Western city of Zhanaozen in 2011 happened in a relatively pre-social media era for Kazakhstan, its echoes, and particularly the government crackdown, continue to reverberate through cyberspace to this day.

## Digital Communication and Closed States

Generalizing the impact of technology on political participation is difficult because of the varying economic, social, and political systems globally. In traditional democracies, new ICTs have made political participation more accessible and increased the number of political players. As an interactive medium characterized by relatively low barriers to entry and minimal external regulation, the Internet offers a novel avenue that fosters greater political participation and overall democratization. The nature of social media, which allows users to share information, facilitates horizontal flows that foster trust in individuals, reducing the need to trust the media platform itself.

Scholars have observed that the Internet functions as a distinct public sphere, providing unique opportunities for marginalized individuals to engage with the political system (Barber, 2001; Solop, 2001). Extensive research in this domain has indicated a positive correlation between Internet usage and political participation (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2022; Bode, 2012; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Furthermore, specific forms of online engagement, such as the use of social media platforms, have demonstrated comparable predictive power to socioeconomic status about political participation (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). A

comprehensive meta-analysis of existing studies in this area revealed that online participation is as highly associated with political efficacy as offline participation (Oser, Grinson, Boulianne, & Halperin, 2022).

However, in other societal contexts, digital media platforms may provide a different impact. The effect is contingent upon contextual factors and settings. The political landscape, access and distribution channels, and the level of trust in specific media platforms serve as mediators that influence the efficacy of both digital and traditional media within diverse state and system frameworks (Mueller, 2013). Digital media can influence the magnitude and intensity of nonelectoral and unconventional behaviors occurring outside the traditional political system (Feezell, 2016; Valenzuela, 2013). The influence of the Internet and social media on politics can be considerably more substantial when applied to different contexts, accounting for levels of media trust, and focusing on broader indicators of political participation, such as protests (Gainous, Abbott, & Wagner, 2019).

Indeed, in closed or semiauthoritarian states, the influence of the Internet assumes heightened significance (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Within such contexts, social media and the Internet can serve as tools for political mobilization and the dissemination of dissenting information, where avenues for such activities were previously limited (Jost et al., 2018). Research has found that the consumption of digital information that challenges the state can lead to more dissident attitudes and a greater willingness to protest (Wagner, Gainous, & Abbott, 2021). In countries where access to traditional media is frequently restricted and repressive laws and customs prevail, using the Internet can create unprecedented opportunities for fostering protest (Abbott, Gainous, & Wagner, 2023). Indeed, in regimes that have exercised control over traditional media for extended periods, information communication technologies have the potential to exploit vulnerabilities and act as catalysts for political transformation (Bailard, 2014; Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Access to information on the Internet can gradually undermine authoritarian rule and legitimacy by influencing public approval of the regime, even in strong and populist authoritarian countries like China. In an experimental study, Tang and Huhe (2014) demonstrated that alternative frames created and disseminated online by social media users often challenge and weaken authoritarian governments. International evidence suggests that the Internet's impact on government disapproval is more pronounced in countries where traditional media is censored (Zhuravskaya, Petrova, & Enikolopov, 2020). Furthermore, a recent study covering 21 authoritarian countries by Ruijgrok (2021) found that censorship measures do not diminish the positive relationship between Internet use and antiregime sentiment. This trend is also observed in democratic settings, where the negative association between social media use and political trust can be explained by negativity and antiestablishment sentiments (Ceron, 2015). Several studies from Russia and China have shown that social media use is negatively related to trust in political institutions, although the extent of this relationship varies (Malkina, Ovchinnikov, & Kholodilin, 2021; Placek, 2019).

The use of social media can create a platform for self-expression and engagement in a country where political communication is controlled (Bekmagambetov, 2024). The Internet can create an alternative source of information that is not controlled by the state, which can change the universe of available facts and opinions. Consequently, the Internet can assume the role of a mechanism for political transformation by establishing a virtual space for like-minded individuals to congregate, share ideas, and disseminate information (Chadwick & Howard, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). This challenges state-backed

traditional media, and as trust in new media platforms grows, attitudes are expected to change. Within this context, it is anticipated that Internet consumption will contribute to shifts in attitudes toward governance and subsequently induce changes in behavior that center around protest.

The efficacy of digital media messages hinges, to a significant extent, on the receptivity and trustworthiness attributed by consumers to specific media outlets (Ladd, 2010; Page & Shapiro, 1983). Trust plays a crucial role in shaping the utilization and consumption patterns of media sources. Individuals are inclined to engage with media outlets they trust, while actively avoiding those they lack confidence in (Tsfati, 2010). As media outlets reinforce their preferred messages, a sense of familiarity and comfort is cultivated among consumers. This, in turn, motivates individuals to selectively expose themselves to content that aligns with their established worldviews, effectively shielding themselves from narratives that challenge their core beliefs (Borah, Thorson, & Hwang, 2015; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Sunstein, 2009). Consequently, trust operates as a compelling force, drawing viewers toward trusted media sources, and this trust is further solidified through the perpetuation of preferred messaging (Hopmann, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2015). Moreover, trust empowers Internet users to exercise control over their consumption habits, enabling them to limit their exposure to sources and stories that resonate with their preferences (Prior, 2007).

Kazakhstan provides an excellent case study for testing the effect of digital media consumption on political attitudes and behaviors. The Internet and social media there provide alternative avenues for gathering critical news and dissident information (Bekmagambetov et al., 2018). It allows us to explore the impact of social media on political attitudes in a traditionally restrictive information environment. In addition, we can consider the impact of exposure to dissident information on attitudes and the potential increases in political protests (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). Furthermore, since there is a mixed view on the reliability of the social media platform Facebook, we can explore how trust in the medium matters. In particular, we can measure the importance of the relationship between Facebook use and political participation, and whether higher degrees of trust in Facebook actually increase the impact of dissident information flow on such social media.

To explore the relationship between exposure to dissident information on social media, trust in government, and expressed protest intent, we created four hypotheses based on the existing literature and research. The hypotheses focus on understanding these relationships within the context of Kazakhstan, where the government enjoys relative popularity (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2020). The hypotheses also consider the impact of citizens' beliefs about the prevalence of dissident information on social media and their trust in the medium.

Our approach is to build a user profile based on the demographics of those most likely to be exposed to dissident information on social media in Kazakhstan. We then consider how exposure to dissident information relates to general trust in the government and, separately, to the expressed intent to engage in protests against the state.

H1:     *Increased exposure to dissident information on social media is associated with decreased levels of general government trust among citizens.*

H2:      *Increased exposure to dissident information on social media is associated with a stronger inclination among citizens to express protest intent.*

Furthermore, we theorize that the effect of exposure to dissident information on social media on an individual's view of the state and protest intent is conditional upon their trust in Facebook. Trusting Facebook might lead to increased use and greater exposure to dissident information. Facebook is particularly important in our study because it is more likely to encourage dissidence and protests than Russian social media platforms. This is attributed to its perceived greater politicization and independence from state controls and content restrictions (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). Our survey reveals that among the top three social media platforms where citizens consume political news—Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube—Facebook has the highest proportion of users who frequently encounter government-critical information. Specifically, approximately 77.6% of Facebook users reported some level of exposure to dissident content, surpassing Instagram's 75.4% and YouTube's 72.8%. Focusing on the most frequent exposure categories ("Everyday" and "More Than Once Daily"), Facebook leads again with 29.7% of its users in these categories, compared with 20.0% for Instagram and 17.9% for YouTube. This indicates that Facebook is the primary platform for disseminating dissident information among the population. Therefore, using trust in Facebook as the main moderator in our study is justified, as it directly impacts how individuals process and are influenced by the critical content they most frequently encounter on this dominant platform.

The consumption of dissident information is expected to influence the development of attitudes toward the government (Ruijgrok, 2021). As demonstrated by Tsfati and Cappella (2005), media trust exhibits an enduring nature that sharply contrasts with the more sporadic patterns of media consumption—a disparity that may be especially pronounced in authoritarian settings. Established literature on media trust finds that confidence in media moderates the effects of media messages on individuals' attitudes and behaviors; however, this body of research predominantly focuses on democratic or more open environments where a wide array of media sources exists (Liu & Bates, 2009; Müller, 2013; Tsfati et al., 2022).

Building on this foundation, we theorize that the effect of dissident information flow on social media varies depending on one's trust in the medium. Specifically, the magnitude of the influence increases with higher degrees of trust in Facebook. Similarly, although consumption of dissident information is correlated with protest intent, this relationship should be more pronounced among those who have higher trust in the platform.

H3:      *Trust in Facebook moderates the negative relationship between exposure to dissident information on social media and general government trust, such that the decrease in government trust is more pronounced among individuals with higher trust in Facebook.*

H4:      *Trust in Facebook moderates the positive relationship between exposure to dissident information on social media and citizens' protest intent, such that the increase in protest intent is stronger among individuals with higher trust in Facebook.*

Additionally, we consider that trust in government should mitigate the influence of dissident information on protest intent (Zhang & Xu, 2023), and we account for this factor in our final model.

**Data and Measurement**

The data for this study come from a systematic sample based on a face-to-face mass survey conducted in 2021 among Kazakhstan's population aged 18 years and older ($N$ = 6,800). Respondents were interviewed in their residences. The sampling involved multiple stages. At Stage 1, urban and rural sample size quotas were calculated for each oblast based on the Bureau of National Statistics data. Stage 2 involved selecting survey starting points in urban and rural settlements, with districts and streets randomly chosen from the cartographic list of each settlement. Stage 3 focused on household selection, where every five households were selected in the city and every three in villages from the streets selected in the previous stage. Only one interview was conducted per household in Stage 4. Selection of respondents was based on quotas—in each household, respondents were selected according to three criteria—gender, age (18–29 years old, 30–45 years old, 46–60 years old, 61 years old and older), and ethnicity (Kazakhs, Russians, and other). The number of interviewed men and women, as well as respondents from different age and ethnic groups, were calculated based on the Bureau of National Statistics data for each region or city.

Our analysis strategy involves fitting a series of regression models to provide a step-by-step contextual and theoretical path by which social media is shaping Kazakhstan's political climate. This centers around exposure to dissident information on social media, as such information is largely absent from traditional media platforms in Kazakhstan. We begin by building a user profile of those exposed to such information, modeling this as a function of media preference, ethnicity, gender, age, education, and secular religious identification (see Appendix for the operationalization of each variable).

Next, we estimate a model to test whether exposure to dissident information is related to general government trust, controlling for all the demographics from the previous model. Then, we fit another model to examine whether exposure to dissident information is related to protest intent while holding demographics constant.

Finally, we explore conditional relationships by replicating the two previous models and including an interaction between exposure to critical information and trust in Facebook in our models of general government trust and protest intent. We expect that heightened trust in Facebook will strengthen the negative relationship between exposure to dissident information and general government trust and strengthen the positive relationship between exposure to dissident information and protest intent. In the last model, we add general government trust as a control variable in the protest intent interaction model to isolate the media effects from progovernment dispositions.

We measure exposure to dissident information on social media with a single item: "Have you ever seen articles criticizing the current government on social networks?" (Response options: more than once a day, every day, three to five days a week, one or two days a week, less than once a week, and never). We inverted the order of the response options, and when we used it as an independent variable, we treated it as numeric, rescaling it to range from 0 to 1 while maintaining the intervals.

The modal response to the question addressing exposure to dissident information is "never," which exceeds 30% of the sample. Conversely, just more than 30% of the sample reports exposure at or above three to five days weekly, indicating that dissident information is not uncommon.

We measured trust in Facebook with the following question: "Please rate how true the news from these sources is." Respondents were given a list of social media platforms. We focus on Facebook because earlier research suggests that this is where dissident information is most prevalent, at least relative to Russian platforms such as VKontakte (Gainous, Wagner, & Ziegler, 2018; Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). Respondents selected from a set of percentage ranges. Roughly 25% fell in the 1%–25% trust range, nearly 27% in the 26%–50% range, about 31% in the 51%–75% range, and just more than 17% in the 76%–100% range. Trust in Facebook is relatively evenly distributed. We use this variable both as an independent and dependent variable. The distribution of responses on both of these items is presented in Figure 1.
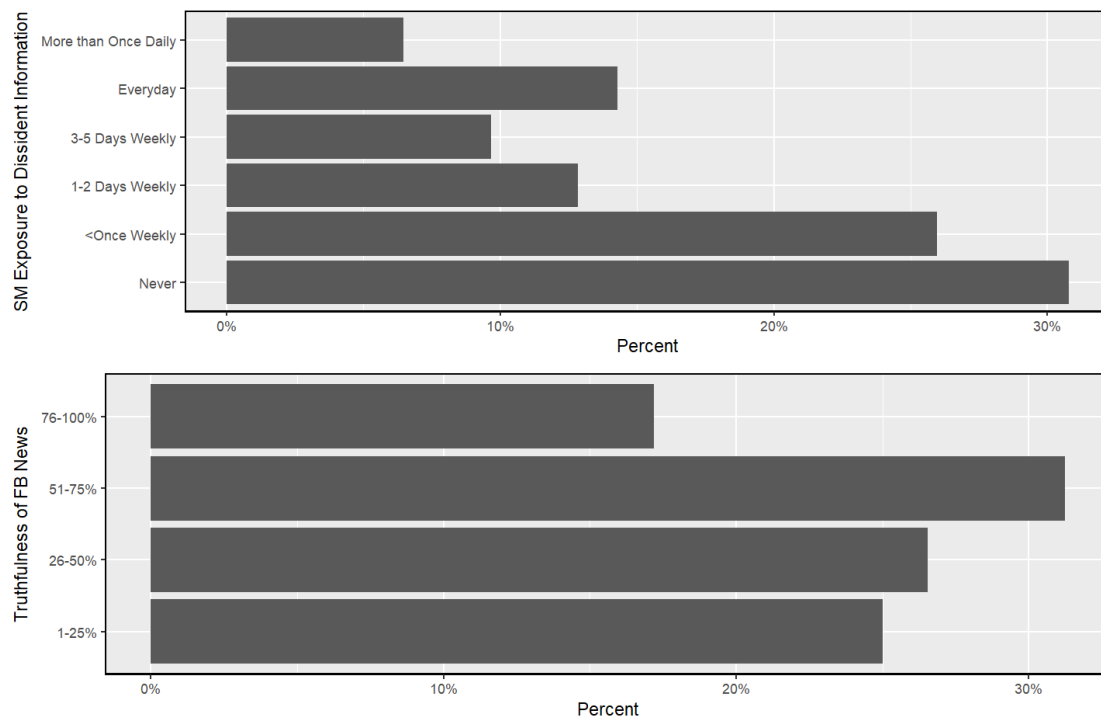


*Figure 1. Distribution on dissident information flow and Facebook trust.*

To measure our first primary dependent variable, trust in government (also used as an independent variable), respondents were asked if they had trust in government, Parliament, Mashlikhat (local parliament), political parties, police, Akim of the region, and Akim of the locality (excluding Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent). Response options were yes (1), somewhat yes (2), somewhat no (3), and no (4). We inverted these so that higher values represented more trust, added them together, and rescaled the index to range continuously from 0 through 1, maintaining the original intervals ($\alpha = 0.93$). Our next dependent variable, inclination to protest, was measured with a single item: Are you personally ready to take part in

any protest actions? (yes, somewhat yes, somewhat no, and no). We recoded this item so that higher values indicated more readiness to protest.

The distribution of both dependent variables is presented in Figure 2. To begin, the distribution of trust in government is clearly skewed toward the positive side of this index. Kazakhstanis appear to be relatively trusting of the government. The distribution peaks around the mean (0.63), well above the midpoint. Also, a sizable proportion of the distribution is located at 1 on the scale, indicating that many respondents said "yes," they trusted all of the institutions included in the index. As for the distribution on our other primary dependent variable, inclination to protest, it is disproportionately tilted toward a lack of inclination to protest. This is not surprising, given the high level of trust. About 66% say they are not ready to protest, 29% say somewhat no, and only about 3% and 2%, respectively, say they are somewhat ready to protest or are ready to protest.
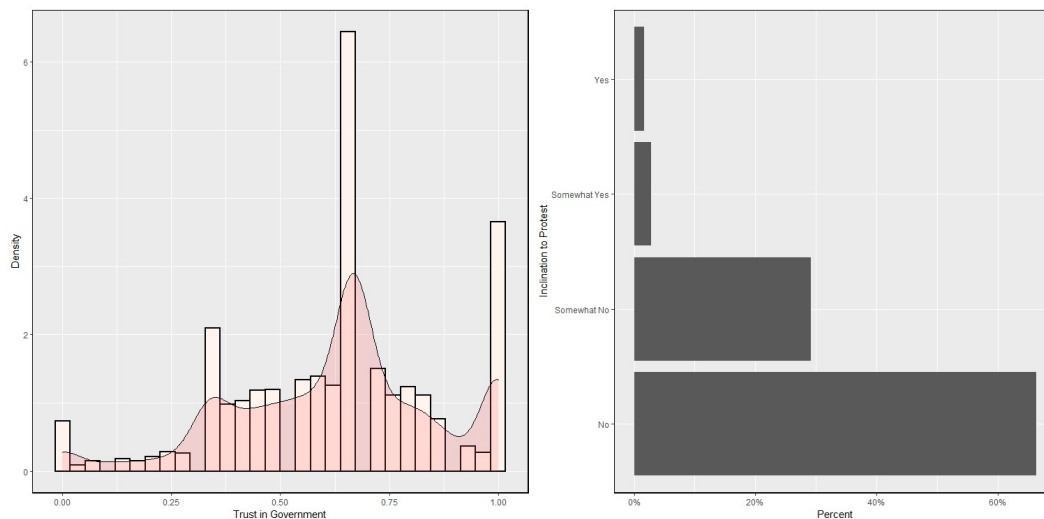


*Figure 2. Distribution on dependent variables.*

**Model Results**

To begin, the results of our profile model are presented in the first column of Table 1. As expected, respondents who prefer digital news sources are more likely to encounter dissident content on social media. Ethnic Kazakhs are also more likely to be exposed to such information; converting the coefficients to odds ratios reveals that they are 1.17 times more likely to encounter dissident information than other ethnic groups. Gender does not show a significant effect, as women are not statistically different from men in this regard. However, age has a negative association: For every additional year in age, respondents are 0.56 times less likely to be exposed to dissident information. Lastly, secular respondents are 1.55 times more likely to report exposure to dissident content compared with their nonsecular counterparts.

Moving on to our hypothesis tests, the results of our first OLS model are presented in the second column of Table 1, testing Hypothesis 1 (H1)—that exposure to dissident information on social media is

negatively related to general government trust among citizens. We find clear support for this hypothesis. Each one-unit increase in exposure to dissident content on social media is associated with a 0.07 decrease in trust in government, while controlling for media preferences and demographic factors.

We also find support for Hypothesis 2 (H2), which posits that exposure to dissident information on social media increases the likelihood of protest intent (see Column 3 of Table 1). The relationship here is quite substantial: Each one-unit increase in exposure to dissident content increases the odds of expressing protest intent by 2.89 times.

*Table 1. Regression Models.*

| | SM Dissidence | Gov Trust | Protest Intent | Gov Trust | Protest Intent | Protest Intent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SM Dissidence | | -0.07*** | 1.06*** | −0.04** | 1.39*** | 1.31*** |
| | | (0.01) | (0.08) | (0.02) | (0.15) | (0.18) |
| FB Trust | | | | 0.05*** | 0.03 | −0.12 |
| | | | | (0.02) | (0.15) | (0.18) |
| SM Dissidence × FB Trust | | | | −0.13*** | −0.68** | −0.08 |
| | | | | (0.03) | (0.26) | (0.32) |
| Gov Trust | | | | | | −0.43** |
| | | | | | | (0.18) |
| Media Preference Score | 0.18*** | -0.01*** | 0.01 | −0.02*** | −0.03 | −0.01 |
| | (0.02) | (0.00) | (0.02) | (0.00) | (0.02) | (0.03) |
| Kazakh | 0.16*** | 0.06*** | 0.04 | 0.06*** | 0.06 | 0.21* |
| | (0.05) | (0.01) | (0.06) | (0.01) | (0.08) | (0.11) |
| Female | −0.02 | 0.01* | 0.01 | 0.02** | 0.03 | 0.08 |
| | (0.04) | (0.01) | (0.05) | (0.01) | (0.06) | (0.08) |
| Age | −0.58*** | -0.05*** | 0.15 | −0.01 | 0.43** | 0.63*** |
| | (0.12) | (0.02) | (0.14) | (0.02) | (0.18) | (0.23) |
| Education | 0.02 | −0.01 | −0.03 | −0.02*** | −0.05 | -0.23*** |
| | (0.05) | (0.01) | (0.05) | (0.01) | (0.07) | (0.08) |
| Secular | 0.44*** | -0.06*** | 0.10 | −0.06** | 0.21 | 0.34 |
| | (0.11) | (0.02) | (0.14) | (0.03) | (0.17) | (0.24) |
| Observations | 6,743 | 4,639 | 6,538 | 3,004 | 4,498 | 2,938 |
| R2 | | 0.028 | | 0.047 | | |

*Note*. Trust in government models are OLS, others are ordered logit,
*$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$

Finally, we tested Hypotheses 3 and 4 using interactive models to examine whether trust in Facebook moderates the relationship between exposure to dissident information on social media and, respectively, trust in government (H3) and protest intent (H4). We found support for the first of these hypotheses (H3), and while both interaction terms are statistically significant, the substantive results are best interpreted graphically. For H3, the results are illustrated in Figure 3. The negative relationship between

exposure to dissident information and trust in government is strongest among those with the highest trust in Facebook (76%–100%, labeled as 4). It is weakest among those with the least trust in Facebook (1%–25%). The slope gradually becomes steeper as trust in Facebook increases, indicating that higher trust in the platform amplifies the negative effect of dissident exposure on government trust.
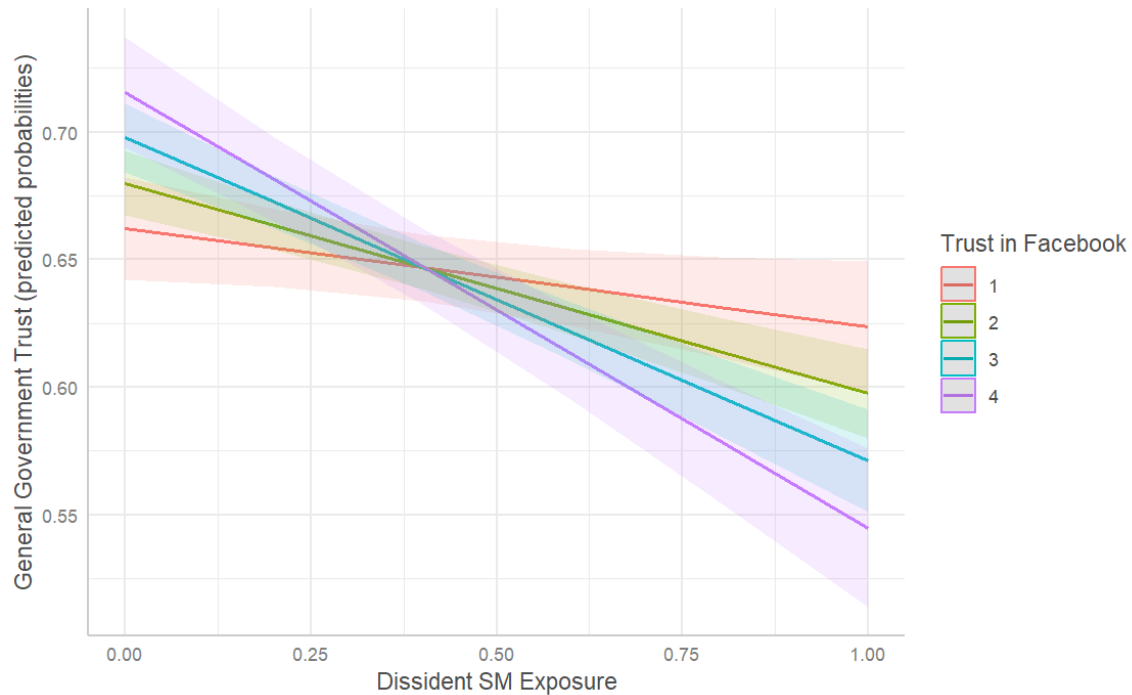


*Figure 3. General government trust interaction results.*

Regarding H4, the results are depicted in Figure 4. Since these findings are based on an ordered logit model, interpreting the differences in predicted probabilities across each response category for readiness to protest is most effective. The bottom two panels show a generally low probability of respondents expressing a willingness to protest. There is little to no discernible relationship between trust in Facebook and protest readiness at any level of dissident information exposure.
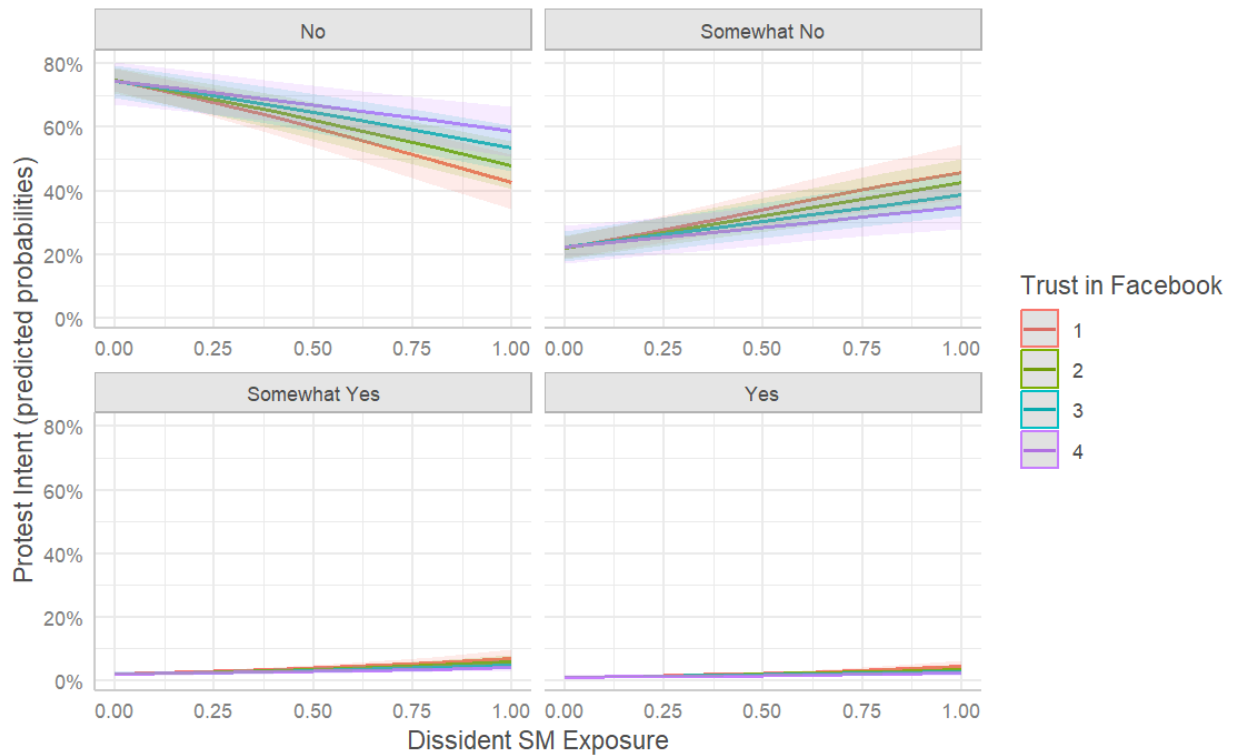
***Figure 4. Protest intent interaction results.***

In contrast, the top two panels reveal that the probability of respondents indicating "No"—that they are not ready to protest—is substantially higher among those with the highest trust in Facebook. This probability decreases only slightly with increased exposure to dissident information, remaining higher relative to other trust categories. Respondents with the lowest trust in Facebook are more likely to move out of the "No" category as exposure to dissident information increases. Simultaneously, the probability of respondents selecting "Somewhat No" increases significantly with dissident exposure among those with low trust in Facebook, while it only slightly increases among those with high trust.

These findings run counter to our expectations for H4. We anticipated that the increase in protest intent would be stronger among individuals with higher trust in Facebook, but the results suggest the opposite. One possible explanation for this unexpected result is the confounding effect of government trust. Since Facebook is generally popular in Kazakhstan, a large proportion of users may also have high trust in the government. Their reluctance to consider protest action could be influencing the observed relationship.

To address this, we added general government trust as a control variable in the final interaction model (column 5 in Table 1). The inclusion of government trust reduced the effect size and eliminated the significance of the interaction term. This suggests that the confounding effect of government trust likely

affected our results. However, even after accounting for government trust, we still did not find support for our fourth hypothesis (H4).

## Discussion and Conclusion

The digital age has ushered in a new era of political communication, with social media platforms playing a prominent role in shaping public opinion, especially in restrictive information environments. The results of our analysis provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between exposure to dissident information on social media and various political attitudes and behaviors in Kazakhstan, a critical Central Asian state.

The initial findings from our profile model highlight the demographic nuances associated with exposure to dissident information. Ethnic Kazakhs, for instance, are more likely to be exposed to dissident information on social media. This suggests that ethnic identity plays a role in shaping one's online experiences and perceptions. Age and secularism also emerge as influential factors, with older respondents less likely to encounter dissident information and secular individuals more likely to report such exposure.

Our hypothesis tests reach deeper into the implications of these exposures. The data support H1, indicating that exposure to dissident information on social media can erode trust in government.

These findings indicate that social media remains a significant challenge for authoritarian governments, as it appears to undermine political trust, a phenomenon observed in previous research within both democratic and authoritarian settings (Ceron, 2015; Placek, 2019; Shen & Guo, 2013). In contrast to state-controlled traditional media, social media presents a more complex obstacle for such regimes. The negative relationship between exposure to government-critical content on social media and political trust suggests that unregulated or less controlled criticism on these platforms can erode public trust and the legitimacy of the regime (Tang & Huhe, 2014). Unlike television, social media provides a space where criticism can be more spontaneous, widespread, and difficult to control. This poses a substantial challenge for authoritarian governments that rely on narrative control to maintain their legitimacy (Gainous et al., 2019).

While exposure to dissident information appears to decrease trust in government, it simultaneously increases the likelihood of expressing protest intent. This suggests that while social media can foster skepticism toward institutional entities (Zhang & Xu, 2023), it can also galvanize political action (Tertytchnaya & Lankina, 2020).

The relationship between exposure to critical content on social media and the intention to protest aligns with previous studies conducted in authoritarian contexts (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Jost et al., 2018; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Particularly in Kazakhstan, protest activities may also be interpreted as "rightful resistance," a form of proactive engagement with the regime (Han, Du, & Shao, 2023; O'Brien & Li, 2006). Our findings contribute to the literature on the authoritarian "gardening" theory, which proposes that regimes can benefit from permitting a controlled amount of policy and leadership criticism, thereby further legitimizing themselves (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019).

By using interactive models, we have achieved a more nuanced understanding of these relationships. Specifically, the level of trust individuals place in platforms like Facebook can influence how exposure to dissident information affects their overall trust in government. This highlights the significance of trust in the medium itself, as it acts as a powerful force that attracts audiences to trusted media outlets; moreover, this trust is reinforced through the continuous repetition of preferred messaging (Hopmann et al., 2015).

Interestingly, although the interaction between trust in Facebook and exposure to dissident information did not yield results consistent with our initial expectations, incorporating trust in government into the model revealed that exposure to dissident content alone might be sufficient to prompt political action (or at least the readiness to engage in such action). This suggests that trust in the platform may not be a major factor contributing to engagement in political activities.

One of the main limitations of this study is its inability to establish causation. It is unclear whether exposure to critical content on social media induces changes in political attitudes and the propensity to participate, or if individuals who are already predisposed to certain political views and behaviors are more inclined to seek out dissident information. To clarify the directionality of these relationships, further longitudinal research is required. Additionally, implementing more nuanced measures of Facebook news consumption, platform trust, and political trust and participation would facilitate a more rigorous empirical analysis.

Despite these limitations, this article offers several strengths. Although the moderating role of media trust has been widely acknowledged in political communication discourse—primarily within democratic settings (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsfati et al., 2022)—this study extends this understanding to authoritarian regimes. Moreover, it introduces a rich data set with precise measures of digital media consumption and political participation. Notably, it includes metrics on the frequency of exposure to government-critical social media content, perceptions of trust in Facebook news, and protest intent, thereby enriching our collective understanding of the political effects of specifically political information online.

The Arab Spring uprisings underscored the transformative power of social media in all political regimes, especially in authoritarian contexts (Diamond, 2010; Howard & Hussain, 2013). Scholars have long posited that in regimes with controlled traditional media, digital platforms become essential avenues for political dissent (Khamis & Vaughn, 2012; Yang, 2009). Our findings in Kazakhstan echo these broader trends, highlighting the role of social media in shaping political attitudes and behaviors in restrictive environments.

The significance of our findings lies in their implications for understanding political communication in authoritarian contexts. The nuanced relationships we uncover between exposure to dissident information, trust in digital platforms, trust in government, and protest intent underscore the interplay of factors shaping public opinion in the digital age. Our results also emphasize the importance of demographic factors, such as ethnicity, age, and secularism, in modulating these relationships.

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**Appendix**
*Variable Operationalization*

- Ethnicity (Kazakh, Russian, other—write in): Kazakh = 1, Other = 0.
- Gender (male, female): Female = 1, Male = 0.
- Age is measured in years: Rescaled to range continuously from 0-1.
- Education (secondary education, vocational education, higher education—specialist, bachelor, master, candidate, doctor, PhD): Rescaled to range from 0–1.
- Secular religious identification (Islam, Orthodoxy, None): None = 1, Other = 0.
- Media Preference score:

First, all media options were categorized into traditional and digital.

Traditional Media: Print media (newspapers, magazines), Radio, Television.

Digital Media: Messengers (WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber, etc.), Social networks (Facebook, VKontakte, Instagram, YouTube, Tik-Tok, blogs), Internet sources (news, analytics, official websites)

Second, for each respondent, two scores were generated based on their responses. For each mention of a traditional media source in any of the three spaces provided, the score was increased by 1. The maximum score a respondent could have was 3 if they mentioned three traditional sources. For each mention of a digital media source in any of the three spaces, the score increased by 1. Again, the maximum score a respondent could have was 3 if they mentioned three digital sources.

A single score was computed to capture the difference between the two sources of news as follows:

*Media Preference Score = Digital Media Score − Traditional Media Score*